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ABSTRACT

One of a series dealing with current issues affecting language arts instruction, this paper brings into focus some of the issues surrounding textbooks in the schools so that informed decisions can be made regarding textbook selection and use. The major portion of the paper explores professional opinions regarding textbooks, noting the following: (1) criteria for textbook purchases should be dependent on selection and adoption procedures as well as on the place of textbooks in the instructional program; (2) recognition of the need for local professional decisions has grown so that even states publishing an "approved text list" have broadened the numbers and kinds of people involved in constructing the list and typically include several titles from which schools may select the required text; (3) national, regional, state, and local professional organizations regularly offer sources of help to local governing boards, administrators, and teachers; and (4) the need for careful selection procedures is emphasized by the controversies that can develop around textbook content. The remainder of the paper lists guidelines for the selection and adoption of textbooks, and resources helpful to those selecting texts. (HOD)

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SLATE Support for the Learning and Teaching of English

TEXTBOOK SELECTION

The Issues

The issues surrounding textbooks in the schools are many and varied, including their high cost in a time of reduced budgets, controversial opinions about content in required texts, and selection and adoption procedures.

The purpose of this issue of SLATE is to bring into focus some of these issues so that informed decisions can be made regarding textbook selection and use.

Professional Opinions

The high cost of textbooks is a genuine problem to those responsible for budget-making and budget-keeping, but the tempting solution—"Let's just keep using the textbooks we already have"—is not necessarily an educationally sound one. On the other hand, purchasing a full set of new textbooks because the calendar suggests it is time is not a justifiable solution either. Criteria for textbook purchases should be closely dependent on selection and adoption procedures as well as on the place of textbooks in the instructional program as a whole.

The number of states mandating a single "approved" text is dwindling. Recognition of the need for local professional decision has grown so that even the states publishing an "approved text list" have broadened the numbers and kinds of people involved in constructing the list and typically include several titles from which schools may select the required text. Although such freedom is a welcome breath of fresh air, it places increased responsibility on local professionals and assumes careful, studied procedures for text selection.

National, regional, state, and local professional organizations regularly offer sources of help to local governing boards, administrators, and teachers. Most of this help is in the form of appropriate checklists, annotated bibliographies of available texts, consultants to assist selection procedures, and the like (see *Resources* below). None of this help should be viewed as a substitute for local district and school building personnel actually examining the texts potentially available to them in light of their identified and agreed upon aims, goals, and student needs.

The need for careful selection procedures is emphasized by the controversies that can develop around textbook content. Between 1966 and 1975, for example, the Office of Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association reported over 910 censorship cases that had occurred in U.S. educational institutions. Of this number more than 62 percent were directed toward the public schools: 40 were on the elementary level, 77 on the junior high level, and 386 on the high school level. Sixty-four affected all levels, K-12. What is more alarming than the increase in numbers is that approximately two-thirds of all attempts were successful, resulting in the banning of materials from schools (L. B. Woods, "Is Academic Freedom Dead in the Schools?" *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 1979). These continued attempts by individuals and groups to control what students are allowed to learn (or even read) show little sign of lessening.

A judicial decision which favored a school librarian who contested a school board action to remove a poem from the library in Chelsea (Massachusetts) succinctly states the underlying issue:

> The board acted on the assumption that language offensive to it and some parents had no place in the educational system. With the greatest respect to them, their sensibilities are not the full measure of what is proper education.
>
> The board claims an absolute right to remove this poem from the shelves of the library. It has no such right. And compelling policy considerations argue against any public authority having such an unreviewable power of censorship. If this work may be removed by a committee hostile to its language and theme, then the precedent is set for the removal of any other work. The prospect of successive school boards "sanitizing" the school library of views divergent from their own is alarming.
>
> What is at stake here is the right to read and be exposed to controversial thoughts, a valuable right subject to First Amendment protection. The most effective antidote to the poison of mindless orthodoxy is ready access to a broad sweep of ideas. There is no danger in such exposure; the danger is mind control. ("New Court Decisions," *United States Law Week*, 1, August 1978).

Share These Materials

SLATE Newsletters are offered as resources for dealing with current issues affecting the teaching of English language arts. Reproduce these materials and use them to help promote better understanding of the goals of English teaching.

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Formally adopting and following a set of guidelines similar to that below can prove genuinely helpful when questions about texts occur.

Guidelines for Selection and Adoption of Textbooks

Effective procedures and objective standards for the selection of instructional materials can be established only after careful programs of comprehensive textbook assessment are planned and implemented. Concerned parents and teachers can ask that their schools take such steps as the following:

1. Establish a formal textbook evaluation committee with teacher and administrator representatives from each grade level. Include parent and community representatives as members of the committee.

2. Provide adequate released time for teacher committee members so as to avoid cursory attention to important issues when meetings are squeezed between scheduled classes and added to after-school demands.

3. Develop a "philosophy of textbook use." If, for example, one of the tenets of this philosophy were that textbooks should engage students in the active use of language, then succeeding steps in the selection process would be more sharply focused.

4. Review the current textbook policies and procedures of the local school district as well as those of the county and state.

5. Examine student needs assessment data compiled by curriculum development committees and other sources. This review may reveal areas with special needs.

6. Develop a set of review and selection criteria based on the local school situation.

7. Check the comprehensiveness of the list by comparing it to criteria developed by other educators. Such lists can easily be acquired from state departments of education, county and local school districts, and professional organizations.

8. Ask individuals not on the committee to review and revise the criteria. This participation will help develop understanding and "ownership" of the textbook review and selection process.

9. Distinguish the kinds of instructional materials needed. Too often complete sets of expensive main textbooks are purchased when what is really needed is a set of relatively inexpensive supplementary materials.

10. Solicit and collect all available textbooks which appear to meet the criteria developed.

11. Provide teachers, administrators, and parents with an opportunity to examine and test the materials their students and children appear to need.

Resources

The following list of sources may prove helpful to those charged with the selection of instructional materials. Other possible sources include: inspecting materials on other schools; reviewing publishers' offerings at national, state and local professional conferences; reviewing recommended adoptions by state and local education agencies; attending workshops and presentations by publisher representatives; and scanning of catalogs of professional materials from the National Council of Teachers of English, the International Reading Association, and commercial publishers (both major and minor ones).

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